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ABSTRACT

Bahamian women often carry the bulk of responsibility for family well-being, particularly in the domain of parenting. This ethnographic study investigated the role of Bahamian mothers and their perceptions of parenting. Face-to-face qualitative interviews, comprised of a series of open-ended questions, were conducted with 18 mothers on the islands of Eleuthera, Harbour Island, and Spanish Wells, Bahamas. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Several issues emerged from the data regarding motherhood: the multiple role expectations placed on women, the involvement of the extended family and community in child rearing, and the pregnancy and birthing experience. Most mothers carried the bulk, if not all, of the responsibility for the well-being of their children, with familial obligations taking significant personal tolls; however, the community, often in the form of extended family, provided informal assistance. The small and relatively safe communities provided a reassuring context in which to raise children, and birthing experiences were also more of a family or community affair. Mothering experiences seemed to vary somewhat by island and the unique circumstances of the community. (Contains 27 references.) (Author/EV)

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Mothering in the Bahamas: A Student Ethnography

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Abstract

Mothers are an integral part of Bahamian society and culture. Bahamian women often carry the bulk of responsibility for family well-being, particularly in the domain of parenting. This ethnographic study investigates the role of Bahamian mothers and their perceptions of parenting. Face-to-face qualitative interviews, comprised of a series of open-ended questions, were conducted with eighteen mothers on the islands of Eleuthera, Harbour Island and Spanish Wells, Bahamas. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Several elements emerged from the data regarding motherhood: the multiple role expectations placed on women, the involvement of the extended family and community in child rearing, and the pregnancy and birthing experience.

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In recent years there has been a growing interest in the dynamic role of parents within particular cultures. Despite the availability of a few resources on family relationships in other Caribbean nations (e.g., Charbit, 1980), the Bahamas has been largely excluded from scholarly family research. Most of the literature on the Bahamas covers Bahamian history, including such topics as native peoples, pirating, and slavery (i.e., Albury, 1975; Cash, Gordon, & Saunders, 1991; Craton, 1990; Craton, & Saunders, 1992; Dodge, 1995; Johnson, 1991; Saunders, 1983, 1990a, 1990b; Young, 1966); Bahamian stories and folklore (Armbrister, 1995; Glinton, 1994; Powles, 1996; Tertullien, 1977; Turner, 1988; Wallace, 1992); and poetry (Albury, 1994; Pintard, 1995; Sawyer, 1989). Tourist books are also readily available and offer some insight into the lives of the people, the culture, and key historical sites (e.g., Moncur, 1997; Saunders, 1988; Whittier, 1991). The sparsity of written materials about Bahamian family life, however, has sorely impacted our ability to fully understand Bahamian culture, Bahamian parenting in particular.

Writing more than two decades ago, Dr. Timothy McCartney, a well-respected Bahamian psychologist (1971), attributed the lack of research and writing on the Bahamian family to the "relative lag in the development of the social and behavioral sciences" (p. 45) and a reluctance to "investigate any ritualized behavior pattern" (p.46). In fact, McCartney's dated book is one of the few sources on family relationships that we have been able to locate, devoting sections to Bahamian family structure, Bahamian marital relationships, impotence, and frigidity. Although there is not a section devoted solely to parenting in his book nor are the contents of his book empirically based, he identifies a number of individual, familial and social patterns and /or problems which he believes to impact an adult's ability to parent children including: alcoholism, "unwed mother and children" family, "three generation" family, "stud behavior" (p. 142), and having inside and outside children. McCartney also noted that Bahamians have "definite and closely defined sexual roles" (p. 80). These role expectations may often prohibit men from becoming too closely involved with their children, especially when they are young, while at the same time pushing women into a position of greater responsibility. On the basis of his experience, McCartney wrote, "His [the father's] role in the family unit, as he sees it, is that of a provider of shelter, food and clothing, an administrator of punishment and the general head of the household. His emotional links with his children too often are tenuous or non-existent." (p. 80). "...trouble is, in *his* concept of fatherhood.....The protagonist is he, the father and procreator, the fatherhood is all about his own virility and unlimited capacity to produce offspring in and outside of his marriage" (p. 79). Mothers, in contrast are deemed to be closest to and primarily responsible for their children.

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Mary Langbein's (1970) master's thesis, an ethnography of the economy and family structure of Port Howe, Cat Island in the Bahamas, is another of the few available sources of Bahamian family information. In this village of 38 households, Langbein observed that there were 13 one-person households, 14 households where the husband was present, and 11 households with a woman as head. She suggested that the common practice of women bearing children to the same or different fathers while remaining unmarried fosters a matrilocal family. So, too, she notes that "fathers [have] relative freedom from child support, when the parents are not married" (p. 85). Langbein attributes the disparit distribution of parental responsibilities on the shoulders of women to a horticultural way of life which is possible without men and the necessity of men to leave the family home in order to make much of a cash contribution to the family.

Given the importance of understanding family roles and role expectations to overall family well-being, yet working in a void of existing literature, this paper explores the Bahamian woman's maternal role. What is it that Bahamian mothers do for their families, their children in particular? How is her role as mother shaped by her context, including her relationship with the father and larger community?

Methods

Ethnographic interviews were conducted with eighteen Bahamian mothers during two three-week research trips over a two year period. The mothers ranged in age from twenty to seventy-two and had between one and eleven children. Fourteen were black Bahamians, while the remaining four were white Bahamians. Thirteen of the women we interviewed were married to the father of their children and the remaining five were unmarried, single mothers. These women resided on the family islands of Eleuthera, Harbour Island, and Spanish Wells. The majority of the participants are from Eleuthera, which means "freedom." The island is 110 miles long and is less than two miles wide. It is speckled with small settlements and has 10,600 inhabitants (Hoffman, 1992). Harbour Island is located off the northeastern tip of Eleuthera and is about three miles wide with a population of 1000. Spanish Wells, the only predominantly white island of these three, is off the northwest tip of Eleuthera and got its name from the Spanish galleons which used to frequent the island for fresh water. This cay, which is less than two miles long and a quarter-mile wide, is the richest in the Bahamas. Boys usually quit school by the time they are 14 or 15 in favor of a lucrative fishing career and marry before they are 20. Residents of these islands are descendants of the Eleuthera Adventurers, British Loyalists from the United States, and the Loyalists' African slaves (Whittier, 1991).

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In open-ended, face-to-face interviews, informants were asked to describe their typical day as a mother, their involvement with their children, their work roles in and out of the family, pregnancy and birthing experiences, and the role that their children's fathers play in their lives. All but one interview were audio recorded and later transcribed. Transcripts and field notes were analyzed in order to gain a better understanding of Bahamian motherhood.

Results

Transcripts were reviewed for major themes related to the role of mothers in the Bahamas. Several dominant themes were identified: experiences of pregnancy and childbirth, the multiplicity of roles in which Bahamian mothers engage, and the extensive involvement of the community and extended family in child rearing.

Pregnancy and childbirth

One major theme we identified had to do with experiences of Bahamian women throughout pregnancy and the childbirth experience. During pregnancy, advice often came in the form of old wives' tales, passed down from older, more experienced women to younger women. This was primarily evident among those in the Black communities. The most common or recurring piece of advice of this nature stated that pregnant women were to avoid looking at and pitying ugly, sad or dying things. If a pregnant woman were to do this, her baby would be marked or deformed, similar to that which elicited the grieving response. Other wives' tales indicate that a pregnant woman's craving for specific foods should be satisfied. For if a pregnant woman does not get to eat what she craves (e.g., sugar apple, conch), and then touches herself, her baby will be "marked" at the same location on its body that she touched on her own. The "mark" is likely to be in the shape of that food which she craved. Pregnant women were also warned not to overstretch or overreach so as to avoid having the baby's umbilical cord wrap around its neck. A middle-aged mother of three was quite informative on the issues regarding wives' tales:

> We have all kinds of traditions, like we say when you're pregnant, you don't sit with your legs crossed [or] you're gonna have a hard time having the baby, or they say don't sit in the doorway and they would say don't drink out of a bottle or a can. And they tell us don't eat conch. If you eat conch when you're pregnant, the baby's gonna dribble a lot.

Following childbirth mothers were instructed not to enter sunlight until nine days after the baby had been delivered. On the ninth day mothers were to "bring the baby and they put him out and let him look up at the sun." Other advice encouraged pregnant or recently delivered women not go barefoot or stand in a draft. These inhibitions were intended to protect mothers and newborn children from becoming ill.

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Younger mothers and mothers in Spanish Wells were less inclined to hear and/or to follow these superstitions. A 21-year old mother of a 1-year-old son on Eleuthera said, "I hear old people do that, say that. I don't follow these." A mother of two biological and three step-children in Spanish Wells agreed: "There are a lot more old wives' tales, probably in the black communities, you know, than in Spanish Wells."

In addition to this unique advice offered to mothers, Bahamian women who reside on family islands encounter a different delivery practices. Since medical professionals and facilities are scarce on the family islands, many women deliver their children in their homes. Community nurses, midwives or other experienced women, such as the expectant woman's mother, frequently deliver babies. When asked to describe their childbirth experiences with a midwife or their own mother, the majority of these women agreed that having their children in their homes was a more positive experience than it would have been to have them in a hospital in Nassau. In the home, women could have their loved ones close by and be in a comfortable, familiar setting. A woman now in her forties, reflected on her experience of having her mother deliver her first baby,

> ...and she would make a warm bath, you know, and bathe everything. You know just what you need...and she'd comb your hair and put it way up on the top where it wouldn't be around your face...she was a great help.

In contrast, many women felt their experience of childbirth in the hospital was a very lonely or stressful one. A white American woman now married to a black Bahamian explained,

> At the hospital it's a stressful experience, especially for people who do not like noise or crowds. You have the baby here [on the island] in your own bed, you can walk around your house.....there's no strapping you down to monitors there. It's really a much nicer experience.

A black mother of four boys, two born on Eleuthera and two born in Nassau commented,

> ...in Nassau when you're in labor they just put you in a room and they come and check on you every five or ten minutes. But here they are with you until everything is over. That's what I like about here [on the family islands].

Only when complications were likely or when the child was a mother's firstborn were women encouraged to travel to a hospital in Nassau. Usually the expectant mother travels to Nassau six weeks before her delivery date. When possible, she would live with family members who reside in Nassau, until the baby is delivered and she returns home to her respective family island.

When there are delivery complications, women are usually flown to a hospital in Nassau. On occasion, harsh weather conditions impede transportation to medical facilities on New Providence. When these conditions arise,

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sometimes there is no choice but to deliver the child in the home and hope for a safe delivery. One 30-year-old woman with four boys related how she experienced complications with her last son's birth not long ago. She said, "Storm Lily was passing so she [the nurse] was trying to get me out. She [the nurse] didn't know what would have happened cause the clinic is very old. We were all upset...." Because of the storm she ended up delivering on Harbour Island, despite the difficulty.

With the Free National Movement (FNM) party now in power, more money is being allocated to the family islands for water lines, electrical service and medical facilities. New medical clinics are now being built on both Harbour Island and Spanish Wells. The new clinics are to be furnished with x-ray and basic laboratory equipment. Once the new facilities are complete, residents wonder whether there will be sufficient money to purchase the necessary equipment and personnel for the facilities.

Being "pressed up" and using bush medicine after delivery, while once commonplace, are falling out of vogue. Following the delivery of their children, the older women described the need to be "pressed up." By process of heavy massage or the wearing of a tight girdle-like garment, the bones in women's bodies were pushed back together. This practice was intended to restore the mother's health as quickly as possible. Three of the middle-aged and older mothers offered specific details of the procedures done to them, but believe that younger women are less inclined to engage in such practices. A middle-aged, Eleuthera mother of six children explained:

> After you have the baby you wear a band.... It's like a waist snipper. You wear a band like that but instead of using the hooks you use safety pins, bring it tight back and pin it around. That's to bring your body back together. And it works, that's true! Now the modern system they took that away completely with young women today. They don't do it. When I had my babies my parents made me do it and it was good, because, well my daughter right now complains of pain in her back and she's not as strong as I am. ...a band around the waist really strengthens the back and makes you strong.

Bush medicine was also a popular form of treatment after a child was born. Plants would be used to ease pain and to cleanse the mother's system. A middle-aged mother in Eleuthera described the bush medicine used after all three of her children were born.

> ...they would go into the bush and get these different roots and they would boil it. And they would clean out you know, when you have the baby... they say, "Drink this." That cleans out everything, any debris, anything up in there ... But now you all in the States, they'll say 'antibiotics.'

A mother of eleven children on Harbour Island expressed "Oh yes, plenty of bush medicine, that's all we used to use. This medicine is really good." Those on Harbour Island and Eleuthera were much more likely to use bush medicine for

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these purposes than women on Spanish Wells. Again, these techniques are becoming less common among younger women.

Multiplicity of Roles

Bahamian women consider themselves primarily responsible for all duties associated with child rearing. Regardless of whether or not the male was present within the home, most Bahamian women identified four major role responsibilities: caring, disciplining, teaching, and providing financially.

Caregiver. Tasks identified by women as part of child care included cleaning, feeding, bathing, dressing, and sometimes playing with their children. Playing and spending quality time with children was not always possible or a priority because of felt role strain. One older Eleuthera mother of six children, all born in Nassau, stated:

> I didn't have time to cuddle them [children]. I get to work, then I'd get home. I'd walk in the house, be taking off my clothes, be reaching for a pot. How could you do this all at one time?

A mother of four boys who resides on Harbour Island reiterated this notion when she said:

> I keep really busy until nighttime when they [the boys] go to sleep and I try to spend time with them in between and in the weekends. I do my best to spend time with them, but...'oh, Lord!'

Another mother from Harbour Island, explained this further by saying:

> Most Bahamian women, they so used to being both the man and the women...that is their everyday life. They go to work and come home expecting to cook and clean and you know it is no rest...it doesn't really end till evening.

An American-born Bahamian mother, married with three children, offered additional insight relative to the multiplicity of roles in the following:

> A lot of women get very short tempered because they're exhausted as well from working. They don't have the time to really deal with the children when they come home. They tend to just get the switch or yank them. It's a shame, but the women really do have a hard life around here. The woman is really in charge of raising the kids, as well as bringing in an income, as well as cooking, as well as cleaning.

Generally speaking, the mother is responsible for taking care of her children's physical and emotional needs. The father, if present, rarely takes the initiative to help in these day-to-day tasks, contributing to the role strain experienced by mothers.

Disciplinarian. Because of the centrality of the mothers' role in the lives of their children, discipline is a necessary role demand. One middle-aged mother from Eleuthera reflected her opinion that children of today are in special need of discipline when she said, "You know you have to be strict with these children. They were not like me

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when I was growing up. It is a different age. Like my mother-in-law used to say, 'It's the children of generation of vipers.'"

While discipline is often a role deemed appropriate for fathers, mothers often assume the role of disciplinarian, especially when fathers are absent for extended periods of time, as is the case when they are out on boats crawfishing. One mother of four boys and one girl reflected on the unique circumstances of mothers in Spanish Wells:

> You kind of develop your own little system.... when your husband's away. It's not good to say "When your daddy comes home..." If it's three weeks hence, its no good. Just being a mother, you learn how to do it all. It's always *you* saying, "You can't do this" or "You can't do that," you know? ....In some ways, I really appreciate how hard it is to be a single parent. At least we have our husbands coming home at the end of the month. I mean, if you're a single parent, you are everything to that child -- mother, father, disciplinarian. It especially got difficult as the boys got older.

Father absence as a result of extended leaves of up to five weeks at a time, posed unique challenges for mothers whose husbands fished for a living. The unique demands of this situation were also felt when the men returned home from the sea. Parents often seemed to have to renegotiate with each other relative to authority and discipline. The same mother relates:

> And suddenly the children will say something and I say, "No, you're not doing that," and they say, "Well, Daddy says I can!" And you think, well who cares! I make that decision! You know, you get used to being in charge, when you have to be in charge.... and you think you know where you're going and then...I find it hard to let go a little bit. Now Daddy's home and the children know. Even from small, they know when Daddy comes home they can get away with *anything*!

Teacher. Since women were central in the lives of their children, they also functioned as a major socializing agent, teaching children responsibility and values. A middle-aged mother from Eleuthera who runs a day care in her home shared:

> Mothers.... would train their children, the girls especially, to help to care for the younger ones and to clean, to help with the cleaning and the boys basically have not much to do. They... encourage boys to do things other than [this], fishing and sports -- basketball, volleyball, stuff like that. But the girls, most Bahamian women encourage the girls to stay in, to stay at home -- help with the cleaning and rearing of the younger ones.

A mother of four boys and one daughter in Spanish Wells said:

> I always gave my kid chores. I always consciously made them, when the boys were young, gave them things to do. On Saturday, they could go out and play after their work was done -- like sweep the back patio or clean the car. I did that consciously. I try and make them realize that there was work to be done, for maybe an hour, clean their room or something.

Mothers also taught values by attending church with their children.

Financial Provider. In addition to many domestic responsibilities, most women residing on the family islands of

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Eleuthera and Harbour Island were employed outside of the home, since the income from their work was essential to family sustenance. The exception was on Spanish Wells. Prior to having children and getting married, young women were employed by the local packing plant where they would clean and pack lobster and other fish. Once women on Spanish Wells had children, though, they would stay at home with their children. This practice was largely due to the unique circumstances imposed by the extended absences of their husbands who made a living from the sea; the better economic circumstances of the residents of this island; and the lack of available jobs on the small island.

In contrast, many women from Eleuthera and Harbour Island believed women to carry the majority of the responsibility for providing financially for their families. On these islands women were often employed in jobs related to tourist or service industries. They would have jobs as a maid at the local Club Med or hotel, run a small grocery out of a little room in their house, or work at the phone or electric companies. Professional positions for women basically included nurse or school teacher. Men, on the other hand, often had more sporadic work opportunities. They were often employed in construction, operated small businesses like groceries or dry good stores, and fished. Young people of both sexes were often forced to go to Nassau to find work. A young mother of two girls and a boy, when describing who supports the family the most financially put it this way:

> Because here, the ladies or the wives and stuff, they're more into their family. Even if the husband doesn't give anything, they'd go out of their way and make sure it was there. So I believe that I support them the most.

A few of the mothers that we interviewed on Harbour Island were particularly critical of the fathers of their children. Some of this uninvolvement of fathers seems to be related to the nature of island life specific to Harbour Island. Because it is a very small island and a popular tourist destination, many men hang out at the local bars and dance clubs, romancing tourist women. Alcohol use is widespread and much more visible in this community than most of the others we observed. Men would drink and loiter during many hours of the day at favorite locations. A 30-year-old mother of four from Harbour Island indicated that, "The majority of women work. Men don't work, they keep at the corners drinking, they're just bums."

In some instances fathers were present within the home and did contribute to the families financial needs. Even when men provided monetary resources to the family, women were usually responsible for purchasing necessary items. A young mother of three from a small settlement in Eleuthera noted:

> He don't really mind if they need shoes or anything. He knows I would go out and get it, because I want them to look good. And food wise, I would like them to have anything they want.

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Community and extended family involvement

Another major theme we discovered was the extent and importance of family and community involvement in child rearing. Mothers on all islands conceded that raising children was a community effort. A married mother of three daughters in a settlement in Eleuthera, commented:

> You can say, 'I'm having a bad day can you watch them for a few hours? They're driving me crazy!' Other people help out. If they're doing something wrong, they are corrected. If you can't find them, you ask around and you'll find them.... Everybody knows everybody else's children...Everybody kind of takes care of everybody else.

Another American-born mother of three Bahamian children in Eleuthera described it this way:

> Child rearing here, it's more extended family. It's not just mom, dad, and the kids. You got aunts, uncles, cousins, and they all watch after the small ones and when they get big, it's their turn to watch after the small ones.....If they fall down and hurt themselves on the way home from school, someone picks them up and brings them home. If their tooth gets knocked out, their cousins bring them home with blood streaming down their face.

A mother of five in Harbour Island reiterated similar community dynamics of mutual responsibility:

> I've had quite a lot of help...from my family, well, my husband's family. In terms of when they were younger, helping me to watch over, like babysitting or whatever. They were very good. The family was very strong, and a big help. Since they've gotten older, several people have told me privately 'We saw [your child] doing so-and-so and we knew you wouldn't like that,' which I've appreciated because it helps. It's one of those things I've always told them, 'You can do whatever you like, but I'm going to find out.'

Living in a settlement on the family islands, mothers felt secure that their children's safety as well as their behavior was being monitored by others. Three mothers in Spanish Wells related how "You don't have to worry about your child riding her bike down the street." Another added, "There are people watching out as well. If anybody ever approached them, there are always a lot of eyes watching. I think you feel your children are safe.... It makes your job a lot easier. You don't have to watch them every second." In Spanish Wells, like the other settlements on the family island, mothers expressed relief knowing that others know and care about their children. This is especially true since in most of these settlements, many people are related to each other; they are family and friends.

In Spanish Wells, where most men leave their families for four or more weeks at a time to go fishing, women find comfort and support from other women in their community. A mother of three young children said, "You deal with it [the long absences]." A mother of five related, "You live with it. And everybody's in the same boat. I think that helps. You're all together, in it together." A mother of two added, "In general most men in the community fish. So, it's something that you grew up with. You know uncles and brothers will always be away." Many related that having

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children actually made it easier for husbands to be away for so long. Children gave them something to do while the men were gone. They could count on each other to help.

The value and importance of extended family was repeatedly expressed by these women. A mother from Harbour Island explains,

> The family ties between women are very very strong here. You'll find a mother, grandmother, child all living in the same house raising a family...here in Harbour Island what would be most typical would be single-parent families but living in an extended family environment.

Grandmothers often played major roles in the lives of their grandchildren, especially when the child's mother was not married, as is more frequently the case on Eleuthera and Harbour Island. It was not unusual for grandmothers to be caring for young children while their mothers resided in Nassau in order to obtain steady employment.

Caring was also more generalized in the community, as well. People of all ages look out for each other, especially the children. One older woman, now a grandmother talked about her own role in contributing to the well-being of the children in her community:

> ...I like children. I like to give them good counsel too. You know, I love to give them good counsel. Even though they don't listen, I still tell them when they doing something wrong. All won't listen, but some will listen, you know. Some of the mothers don't. They don't like to counsel the children. But I do. I don't care if they don't like it..

Discussion

This ethnography highlights the centrality of Bahamian mothers in the lives of their children. Most carried the bulk, if not all, of the responsibility for the well-being of their children. These familial obligations often came at great personal cost; many mothers were overburdened with all that was demanded of them. On the other hand, the community at large, often comprised of a good number of relatives, offered a great deal of informal assistance in caring for children and families. The small and relatively safe communities provided a reassuring context in which to raise children, offering an important resource to mothers. Birthing experiences were also more of a family or community affair. Due to the lack of local and sophisticated medical facilities, uncomplicated deliveries were preferable. Plenty of advice abounded for the pregnant woman and new mother. (See Hamon, 1997 for more wives' tales).

Mothering experiences seemed to vary somewhat by island and the unique circumstances of the community. In Spanish Wells, for instance, even though it comes at the cost of having husbands and fathers gone much of the time, life is good and resources are plentiful due to the relatively lucrative living made on the sea. Within this community we

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found strong nuclear families couched within a community of extended family, with active fathers (when they were home) and mothers who were discouraged from working outside the home. The strong Puritan tradition of the island appeared to hold fathers more accountable and responsible to their families, even though their relationships with their children and their wives would be described as traditional. Mothers stayed at home, devoting themselves to the care of the family. A young mother explained,

> "...After I got married I didn't work no more. He told me he didn't want me to work while I had children and to get his food cooked when he came home for lunch time and wash the clothes and all that."

Although certainly not the rule, there were a good number of peripheral or absent fathers on Harbour Island and Eleuthera, affecting what was required from mothers. The lack of involvement of fathers left women few options but to act as primary caregiver for their children. Frustration on this point was evident in comments made by one of our informants in Harbour Island:

> Unfortunately women here are accepting of the men's behavior. They look at their mothers and the men in their lives. These men treated them the same way. Sometimes I feel like going up and shaking them and saying 'Can't you see you've got to get the men involved!'

Many women would like to have the fathers of their children more engaged in their lives.

The small and close knit communities supported mothers in raising their children. Aunts, uncles, mothers, grandmothers, grandfathers, and older children were wonderful resources for raising children. As an American-born mother of three Bahamian daughters put it,

> "It's a good life. It's a good place to raise kids... It's a family thing."

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